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MYSTERY MAN OF MULLET ISLAND

Last Tragic Victim of the Donner Trail — a Weird, Fascinating Story

by **Nell Murbarger**

They're Still Rustling Cattle!

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He Wrestled a Cougar!

Slaughter Odds, 80 to 1!

Steamboat — King of the Buckers!

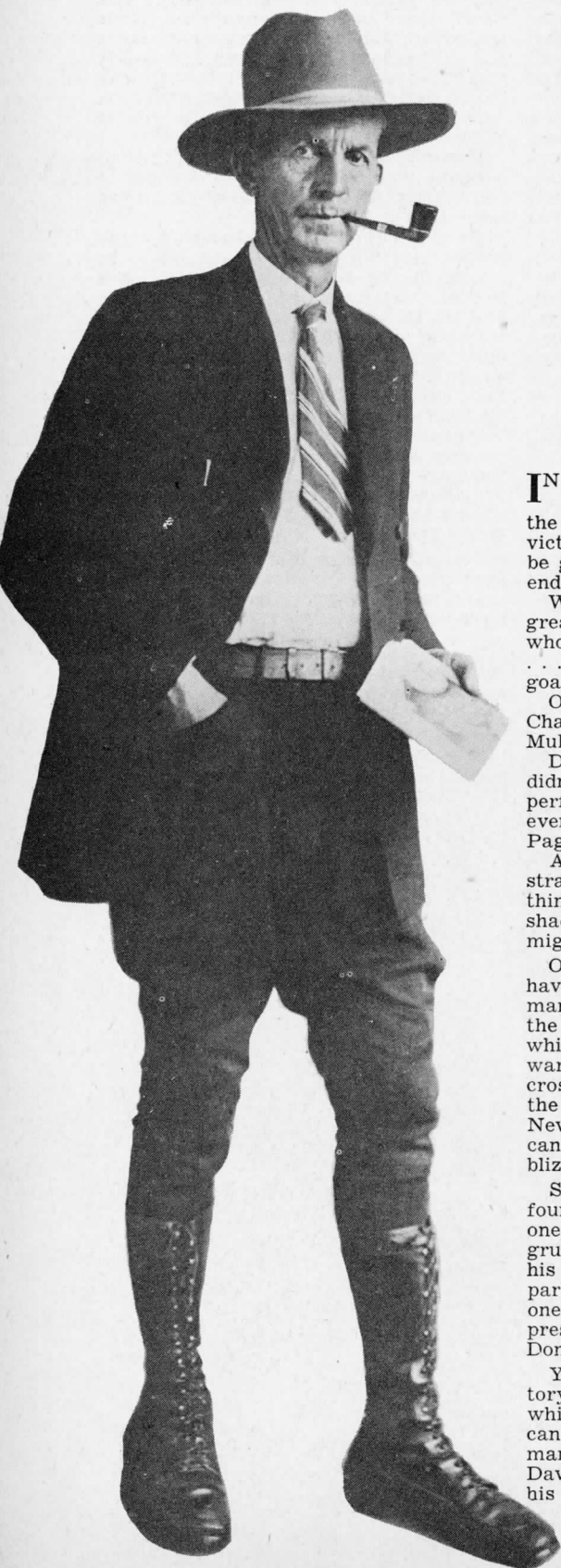


The last tragic victim of the Donner Trail was the

Mystery Man of Mullet Island

BY NELL MURBARGER

Photos from the Author



IN a more charitable age to come, this hero-exalting world may recognize the fact that not all laurels belong to the victors—that a few merit badges should be given for honest effort, regardless of end achieved.

When that time comes, it will be a great day for God's gallants—the men who fight and live and die for a cause . . . and even in death fail to gain their goals.

One of these unsung crusaders was Charles E. Davis, the Mystery Man of Mullet Island.

Davis was not an important hero. He didn't lead any armies to glory; he didn't perform any rousing deeds at sea, or even pull any fast tricks to gain him a Page One picture in the tabs.

All he did was hitch his wagon to a strange obsession, and sacrifice everything he owned—life included—that one shadowy episode in frontier history might be better understood.

Oddly enough, there doesn't appear to have been one tangible reason why this man should have turned his attention to the tragic Donner-Reed emigrant party, which, 80 years earlier, had toiled Westward from Independence, Missouri, across the grim barrier of the Rockies and the parched salt deserts of Utah and Nevada, to a rendezvous with starvation, cannibalism, and death in the roaring blizzards of the Sierra Summits.

Sponsored by no historical society, foundation or museum, he received not one penny of reimbursement for his grueling years of field research. None of his people, so far as known, had taken part in that historic fiasco, nor does anyone seem to recall that Davis had expressed previously any interest in the Donner trek.

Yet, this was the single episode in history he chose for his research . . . all of which only goes to prove that no one can fathom the workings of another man's mind—particularly a man like Davis, who lived in a strange world of his own, and so conducted himself that

even close acquaintances never had the feeling of knowing him intimately.

MY own recollections of Davis stem from the middle 1920's, when I was a teen-ager and he was nudging the half-century mark. I remember him as a sharp-eyed saturnine chap, hawk-faced, dark complexioned, thin as a sapling, and nearly seven feet tall—a man who wore his clothes well and carried himself with military erectness.

Classifying him in the manner of an amateur psychologist, I would say he had been a man unmercifully torn between conflicting personalities.

According to the Brass Rail Biographers of Niland and Brawley, Charles Davis had been born in Massachusetts, of wealthy parentage, and had been reared in a fine home where colored servants did the work, and little boys wore short velvet trousers, and were schooled in the social graces.

On the Davis family tree, however, had grown other fruit than the plums of Back Bay aristocracy.

Deep in the roots of that tree had lain a strong, dark strain of Indian blood.

This, I suspect, was the joker in Charlie Davis's deck of cards.

Throughout his boyhood, this mixture of blue blood and savage had waged a continual battle for his soul; and when the time had come for choosing a life profession acceptable to his family, the black sheep of the Back Bay had kicked over the apple cart.

With all the family portraits rocking in horror, Charles Davis had turned his back on wealth and home and social position, and at the age of 16 years, had signed on as an ordinary seaman in Sol Jacobs' Atlantic fishing fleet. Here, at last, was a life to his liking and he had made the most of it—applying himself to his duties so assiduously that by his eighteenth birthday he had earned his master's papers and the rating of captain.

Captain Charles E. Davis, Mystery Man of Mullet Island.

Quitting the sea in the closing years of the 19th century, Davis had wandered West, and in 1898 had joined the gold stampede to the Klondike. Two years later he had reappeared in Texas, and another five years found him building a home on the flank of a dead volcano, in what is now Imperial County, California.

It is almost impossible to imagine a homesite more forbidding than this place chosen by the former New Englander. Spreading away to the south and east lay a blubbery hell of hissing geysers and boiling mudpots. For forty miles to the north stretched the barren, alkaline waste of Salton Sink—the parched skeleton of an ancient sea that had passed into oblivion hundreds of years before—and overhead hung a merciless sun that sent summer temperatures soaring to 130 degrees in the shade.

Barely had Davis anchored his roots in the new location before the Colorado River let loose its banks and began pouring all its muddy fury into that salt-encrusted sink, thereby turning the old lake bed into the present Salton Sea. In the course of that transformation, Davis's volcanic butte was cut off from other land, and time would find that nubbin of earth known as Mullet Island.

ON this small, bare, sun-parched knoll, that nobody else wanted, Davis built a home which he aptly named "Hell's Kitchen"—and went on to establish there a boat landing, cafe, and dancehall. For the next twenty years he prepared and served "shore" dinners, emceed his dances, and rented boats to fishermen and duck hunters. Seining the mullet fish that had come to inhabit the Salton Sea, he cured them in a homemade smokehouse and hauled them to Los Angeles, where he set up a sidewalk stand at 8th and Broadway, gave free samples to passersby, and dared the authorities to stop him from selling his product. In his spare time "The Captain," as he liked to be known, served as game warden, fought for conservation of natural resources, and made a scientific study of the mudpots and geysers flanking his home.

These details I have cited only to show that a reasonable pattern of normalcy ran through this man, who in 1927, at the age of 50 years, suddenly snapped a padlock on the prosperous business he had labored to build, took French leave of his home and community position, withdrew his life's savings, and turned his full attention to retracing and staking every mile of the Donner-Reed Trail from Independence, Missouri to Fort Sutter, California—a distance of 2,000 miles. In re-blazing this route, it was the avowed intention of Davis to locate every overnight camp made by the wagon train, and to establish positive identification of every unmarked grave left along that tragedy-stalked way!

It would have been a terrific undertaking for even a man in the prime of life . . . and Charles Davis had already passed that point.

"I never met Davis, personally, but I came to know him by reputation when I traced the Utah-Nevada portion of the Donner Trail in 1929-30," said Charles Kelly, lifelong student of Western history and the author of several volumes dealing with that subject. "I had barely started gathering material for my book, *Salt Desert Trails*, when old desert rats began telling me of the incredible exploits of this man who had preceded me over the trail two years earlier."

According to these informants who had worked with him in the field, Davis had

been possessed of an uncanny ability for locating sand-buried relics—an aptitude so pronounced that at times it seemed almost as if some shadowy corner of his subconscious self must have *actual knowledge* of where those pieces had been cast aside when weakening and dying oxen made necessary the abandonment of yet another wagon.

For example, Davis had interviewed a grandson of Lewis Keseberg, (a prominent member of the Donner party) who had told Davis that while his grandfather was chopping firewood from the top of a pine tree that protruded above the mountainous Sierra snows in that winter of 1846-47, he had had the misfortune to drop his axe into a hole formed in the snow around the hole of the tree. Peering down the length of the trunk, he could see the tool lodged in the fork of a branch, but in his weakened condition had not attempted to retrieve it.

THE story had been told to Davis simply as a means of illustrating the depth of that season's snow; but upon visiting the site of the Donner winter camp, Davis walked straight through the forest to the tree holding that axehead—still fixed in the high crotch where it had lodged 80 years before! With the bark of the tree grown almost completely over the blade, there seemed little question but this was the Keseberg axe.

The first few times that Davis was responsible for discoveries of this sort, his feats were passed over as "coincidences" and "luck" . . . But when such exploits become a run-of-the-mill program, folks began looking strangely at one another and asking themselves, "*How does this*

man know where these incidents occurred?"

Time and again, that strange skill was demonstrated as Davis located one after another of the campsites occupied by the Donner party, eight decades before.

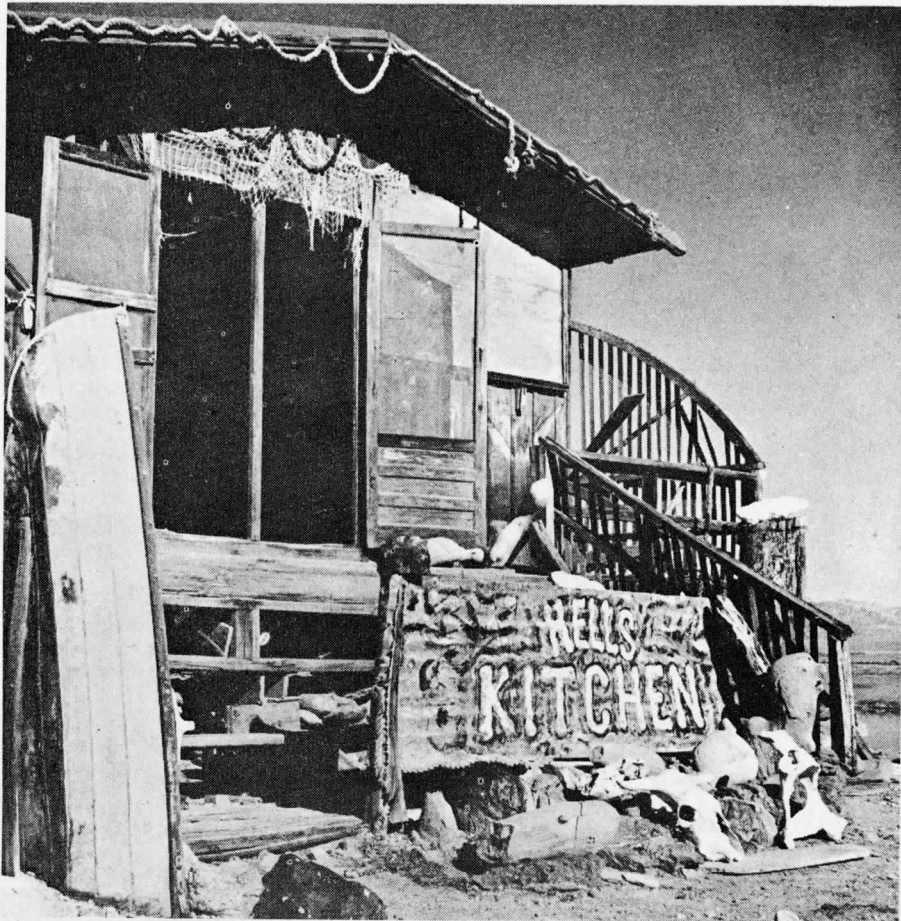
Nearing a point of the desert where it seemed logical to him that a camp must have been made (as determined by mileage records, availability of water, and possible mention of landmarks) Davis would crawl over the area on his hands and knees, sniffing at the ground like a dog trying to pick up a scent. In nearly every instance, Kelly was told, the man would eventually "smell fire" and upon digging down, would uncover a pile of 80-year-old charcoal!

Possibly the most uncanny of all his exploits, was the ability he displayed in identifying the inhabitants of unmarked graves.

At Gravelly Ford, in Nevada, for example, Davis located a grave which he identified and marked as that of John Snyder, murdered Oct. 18, 1846, as result of an argument that arose as the emigrant party had been crossing the Humboldt River. Other historians were quick to find fault with this identification. Snyder *couldn't* have been murdered and buried at that particular crossing, they asserted. It was contrary to all the records. Snyder was buried farther down the river, at Iron Point, or farther up, or across on the other side. He was buried almost any place, it seemed, except where Davis said.

But subsequent investigation proved that the "historians" were wrong, and Davis was right! The grave Davis had been first to identify as John Snyder's,

"Hell's Kitchen" former home of Charles E. Davis, on Mullet Island, in the Salton Sea, Southern California. This photo was taken twenty years after his death.



was occupied by John Snyder and none other.

On another occasion, Davis found two graves and left notes in tobacco cans to mark them as the graves of Hargrove and Halloran.

"I doubted that identification for a long while," said Kelly. "But journals recently discovered prove that Davis—as usual—was correct!"

How had Charles Davis known the identities of these graves? How could he have known their identity . . . unless, as was covertly suggested at the time, he was being supernaturally guided in his quest by the spirit of someone who had taken part in that tragic epic . . .

IN the course of his field research, which spanned a two-year period, Davis picked up a soldier, Emile Cote, who agreed to accompany him for a while. Upon reaching Skull Valley, in Western Utah, the men made camp and continued afoot into the grim desolation and dread immensity of the Great Salt Desert—a land area nearly as large as the State of New Jersey, but wherein Davis was sanguinely confident he could locate a group of five wagons which the Donners had abandoned.

And, incredibly enough, Davis and Cote actually found those wagons, together with the bones of oxen, still lying beneath their yokes where they had fallen more than three-quarters of a century before!

After photographing the scene of tragedy, Davis and Cole continued to follow the Donners' still visible wagon tracks for nearly twenty miles into the salt waste, all along that way finding more bones, and wagon wheels, and barrels fallen to staves, and abandoned household gear. When a depleted water supply at last forced the men to turn

back, they had already been lured too far into the salt flats; and long before reaching their base camp the water in their canteens was exhausted and the two were staggering blindly and raving in delirium.

Experiences of this sort were too much for a man of Davis's years and strength, and completion of his self-assigned task found him broken in health and indescribably weary.

Returning to Fort Sutter, Davis placed at the disposal of the museum there the great wealth of material he had gathered along the Donner Trail—not only the valuable pioneer relics recovered, but reams of filled notebooks and huge files of maps and photographs. When he further expressed a desire to record his impressions of the Donner trek, as interpreted through the retracing of that trail, a stenographer was placed at his service, and for weeks he endeavored to dictate the story.

But the effort was useless. The story refused to take form. The once brilliant and meticulous mind of the man seemed frayed beyond all understanding; and the once strong voice repeatedly faltered and trailed away, until the final result of his dictation was only a purile and disconnected jumble.

Sick in body and soul, his strength and savings exhausted, Charles Davis returned to Mullet Island—a man grown old in the brief time lapse of only two years!

Even in view of the hardships endured and thousands of hours of strenuous labor expended in the course of his two-year efforts, it seems unlikely that physical factors, alone, could have been responsible for the deep spiritual and mental blight that had swept over this Man from Mullet. Is it not possible, then, that Davis's dissolution did not come from physical causes, but was rooted in the

horror and ghastliness transmitted to him vicariously in the mile-by-mile tracing of a tragic trail?

DOGGING the footsteps of the Donners, plodding endlessly over the same desolate barrens they had crossed nearly a century before, sleeping in the same camps where their men and women and little children had died from starvation and cold and hunger and thirst and exhaustion, kneeling beside their unmarked graves in the wilderness, looking upon their abandoned wagons and the whitening bones of their oxen, reading the ghastly, hand-penned records of that terrible winter at Donner Lake, forever seeking to put himself in the place of these people in order to better understand the abysmal depths of despair and desperation that had led them, at last, to cooking and eating the flesh of their own dead—if all this had not contributed to Davis's mental upheaval, at least it had gnawed so deeply into his heart and soul that those memories were to haunt and hound him all the remaining days of his life.

Hoping to divert his mind from this fixation that had come to possess it, former friends of "The Captain" tried to interest him in reopening his little resort on Mullet Island; but if he heard them, he gave no evidence of that fact.

"It almost seemed as if his ears were attuned to a different wave length," one of his friends said later. "He seemed to be hearing 'Voices' the others of us couldn't hear . . ."

And, possibly, that explanation had not been too far wrong. Who knows enough about the hyperphysical to say that ghostly Voices were not coming across the decades to Charles Davis—the voices of martyred Tamsen and George Donner, of "Little Charlie" Stanton, abandoned to perish alone beside the trail, of murdered John Snyder, and banished James Reed, and "Uncle Billy" Graves, and grieving Mary Graves. Who knows but all these shadowy forms from Outer Space were whispering to the Man from Mullet . . . were telling him that through one medium alone might their pioneer epic be recounted in all its grisly horror.

How else explain the fact that Charles Davis, in his mad groping for articulation, should have turned to paint and canvas as his chosen means of expression?

That he had no knowledge of art forms or mediums left him as wholly undaunted as the fact that he had no funds with which to purchase paint and other necessary art materials. When determination is sitting in the saddle, even a lame horse manages to walk.

While making his earlier scientific survey of the mud pots around Mullet Island, Davis had noticed the presence of clay in a wide range of tints. Remembering this, now, he revisited the geyser field, gathered quantities of each color mud, dried it, pulverized it to powder, and sifted it through silk. These natural pigments he then redissolved in the clear oil rendered from native mullet; and with this improvised paint for a "medium" he was ready to start work.

Hunched before a makeshift easel, in the cluttered, poorly-lighted shabbiness of Hell's Kitchen, Charles Davis picked up his makeshift palette, dipped a makeshift brush into makeshift paint, applied the first bold stroke to a makeshift canvas . . . and began pouring out his soul!

Furiously, zealously, fanatically, that outpouring of emotion was to continue

Painting by Charles Davis depicting members of the starving Donner-Reed party as they leave their winter camp at Donner Lake in a desperate attempt to escape across the mountainous snows of the Sierra in January, 1847. The two foreground figures are life size.





Left: Painting of Donner-Reed Trail, by Charles E. Davis. The caption reads: "One Day Late." Right: Primitive painting depicting an episode in the tragic Donner-Reed Trail. Caption of painting: "Her Last Sunset."

for three full years . . . and during those years, in that cluttered fisherman's shack on Mullet Island, were to be born some of the most hauntingly bizarre primitives ever produced by the brush of an American painter!

CHARLES DAVIS wasn't an artist . . . and neither were his paintings ART as taught in schools. Critics would have had a Roman holiday finding fault with their perspective and lines, and shading, and half a hundred other flaws; while the color-limitation imposed by those brown-predominant pigments, gave to all the paintings a grim, somber sameness. But in that grimness, that somberness, lay power and vigor.

Here was a mad epic of salt blizzard and searing sun, of man's pain and perfidy and treachery and tears, of burned wagons and oxen dying in their yokes, of fevered babies crying for water . . . and Death riding through the night on a dark horse.

This was not Art, but Drama—Drama stripped to the bare bone! It was defeat, despair, discouragement, hopelessness, heartlessness. It was more than Art . . . it was the laying bare of a man's soul.

As each canvas was stripped from the easel, another was flung in place before the paint had dried on the first. As long as time and funds permitted, Davis framed the pictures—choosing for that purpose a heavy, unadorned black wood, as gaunt and sepulchral as the scenes themselves. Later, there was neither time nor money for framing . . . but still, the pictures poured forth!

After the walls of Hell's Kitchen were covered with the huge, life-sized canvasses, Davis began piling them anywhere he could find space—on his table, his bed, on the chairs; and finally, he was stacking them on the floor, one upon another.

No one knows how many pictures of the Donner Trail were painted by Davis in the course of that frenzied, three-year effort. Probably there were a hundred of them, at least; possibly even more.

Brought forth under terrific strain, emotional as well as physical, each succeeding canvas had drawn more deeply on the man's failing strength, until, at last, he knew that his fountain of endurance was about run dry. With this realization, Davis yielded to a belated desire to return to the home and family he had left many years before.

But Charles Davis's time on earth was short.

In May, 1933, only a few days after his arrival in New England, the mysterious Man from Mullet Island died quietly at his ancestral home. He was fifty-six years of age.

TIME PASSED—twenty years of it—and with the spring of 1953, I was at Niland, California, doing research for an article on the Salton Sea. While talking with one of the local old-timers, the name of Charles Davis was mentioned, and, instantly, I was remembering that gaunt, cadaverous man with the dark, burning eyes—the Man of Mystery, who had devoted the closing years of his life to tragically recording the tale of a tragic endeavor. With that memory, there swept over me an urge to revisit Mullet Island and see what changes those two decades had brought.

Although far more ramshackle than when I had seen it last, the old boat dock was still strewn with cast-off fishing gear and tattered gill nets, and dead fish. Following the dusty foottrail back from the dock, my memory guided me unerringly through the old cafe and dance-hall—now dark and silent—and on out the rear door of the cafe to the cabin, Hell's Kitchen—still the same smelly, half-forbidding, wholly fascinating place, I had remembered from kid days.

Beaten upon by salt-laden desert winds, and faded and cracked by soaring summer heat, it huddled against the island slope like an old woman shorn of both heart and hope. In the hot dusty little yard, and around the front porch, lay the same clutterly collection—broken oars, a wrecked dory, old rubber boots,

a coil of rotting rope, rusted oar locks, bleached fish bones, an old felt hat trodden into a shapeless mass, and an old wooden bucket, fallen to staves.

Picking my way over the loose boards of the front porch, I stepped through the sagging door into a half-dark room that reeked with an unwholesome moldy smell, like the inside of a grave. There were a few broken chairs and pine benches, a plank table, and an old cook stove with a rusty pipe. Yards of torn fish nets and cork floats hung in dirty gray loops from the bare rafters, and over everything lay a deep mantle of wind-driven sand and packrat litter.

Otherwise there was nothing in the room but a deathlike stillness . . . and the paintings!

Accusingly, questioningly, condemningly, the horror-ridden faces in those primitive portraits stared at me from dark corners, from behind the door, from beneath cobwebbed loops of the fish net. Some still hung on the rough board walls, others leaned against the table, still more were strewn upon the splintered floor, their canvasses torn and cracked and trodden upon by careless feet.

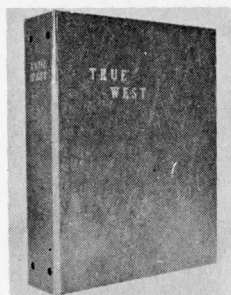
Picking my way around and between the pictures, while the white salt dust on the floor crunched under my shoes, and rose to sting my nostrils and drift restlessly through the dead air, I found myself turning over in my mind the old recurrent questions:

Why had Davis suddenly elected to research the Donner Trail? How had he been guided to lost graves and scenes of tragedy unknown to any living man? And, finally, why had this man of mystery chosen to tell the story of that tragic epic through this mad outpouring of primitive oils?

Only Davis had known the answer to those questions—if even he had known!—and now that he was twenty years in his grave, those questions would never be answered.

It didn't matter that he had been an eccentric character and a man of mys-
(Continued on page 48)

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Interior of Hell's Kitchen, former home of Charles Davis, as it appeared twenty years after death of owner. At that time the bizarre paintings of the Donner-Reed tragedy still filled the room.

Mystery Man of Mullet Island

(Continued from page 13)

tery—or even that a trace of the occult may have entered into his exploits—he still was a good historian and a master researcher. He had left nothing to chance or guesswork—and, regardless of how many "historians" have done it since, he had been the first man in history to retrace the Donner Trail.

Closing the door behind me, I made my way back through the darkened cafe and dancehall, and down the rocky trail to the boat dock. My one desire now was to put distance between myself and that hopeless sepulchre, Hell's Kitchen.

I never expect to go back there again . . . and I hope that the ghost of Charles Davis never goes back there, either. I wouldn't want his ghost to know that this great legacy of paintings—his dying tribute to a tragic epic of pioneer days—had been permitted to fall to ruin beneath the layering dust of indifference.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

For a graphic account of the Donner expedition and the grim fate that befell it, read "The Donner Tragedy," by Sven Skaar, in the first (Winter) issue of *FRONTIER TIMES*, now on the newsstands. Don't miss it!

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